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Health a Focus at International Conference

Bronwyn Fredericks

The 2009 Native American and Indigenous Studies Conference recently held in Minneapolis, Minnesota, United States of America attracted over 600 scholars. The Conference was scholarly and interdisciplinary and was intended for Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars who work in American Indian/ Native American/ First Nations/ Aboriginal/ Indigenous Studies. Scholars came from USA, Canada, Hawaii, Central and South America, New Zealand, Switzerland, England and Australia.

The aim of the Native American and Indigenous Studies Conference is to offer a chance to scholars working in the field of Indigenous Studies to present scholarly work. The 2009 Conference hosted by the Department of American Indian Studies at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis also witnessed the first meeting of the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association. Robert Warrior (USA) was elected as the Association's Chairperson. Maggie Walter from the University of Tasmania was elected as the Association's Secretary. The Association is a multi-disciplinary academic association for scholars who work in American Indian/ Native American/ First Nations/ Aboriginal/ Indigenous Studies. The association is governed by the critical mass of individual scholars and membership is US \$10.00 per year.

There were numerous panel sessions with a focus on health and wellbeing. All panels had three to four people presenting over 1¾ hour or 2 hour time frames. Panels had titles such as: *Decolonizing Knowledge and Practice in Community-Based Health in North America*; *Public Health, Grief Narratives, and Mental Health*; *Research that Matters to Tribal Communities: A Tribally-Driven Research Agenda*; *Spirituality, Indigeneity [Indigeneity], and History*; *Indigeneity [Indigeneity] in Space and Place: Some Geographic Considerations*; and *Narrating Urban Experiences*. While there were many papers centred on the USA and Canadian experiences, many were highly relevant to both the Australian and Canadian contexts. For example, I attended a panel titled *Public Health, Grief Narratives, and Mental Health*. Patrisia Gonzales (University of Arizona) spoke during this panel. Her presentation titled 'Calling Our Spirits Back: Understanding Treatments of Susto/Soul Loss as Interventions in Inter-Generational Trauma' contained information about diabetes, breast cancer, suicide, alcoholism and inter-generational trauma while focusing on Traditional Healing Practices. Patrisia additionally spoke about the trauma that listeners and workers experience in hearing about the traumas experienced by others. She said that both need assistance - the person needing the healing and the healer. Kathryn McKay presented an in-depth case study of a project titled "'Indians" and Spaces of Madness' (Simon Fraser University). Kathryn's work linked colonialism to psychiatry and explored some of the decisions about mental health and mental illness in regards to First Nations Canadians. She

demonstrated through the use of institutional case studies the racist assumptions made about First Nations Canadians based on Aboriginality, white heritage and mental illnesses.

The papers in the panel session titled *Boarding and Residential School Experiences* were particularly emotional. One of the papers in the panel titled 'Stop Making Sense: Imposing a New Sensory Regime on Indigenous Children in Indian Boarding Schools and Australian Institutions for Aboriginal Children, 1880-1940' by Margaret Jacobs (University of Nebraska, Lincoln) linked Indigenous child removal experiences across regions and continents. Margaret's paper provided a context and analysis as to how child removals were one of the destructive strategies used in colonisation across multiple sites. Her book titled *White Mother to a Dark Race Settler Colonialism, Maternalism, and the Removal of Indigenous Children in the American West and Australia, 1880-1940*, published by the University of Nebraska Press and will be available later this year. Margaret's book will become a vital resource for people in Australia too.

There was a wider group of presentations from Australia at this year's conference. I attended some of the presentations to support colleagues and to hear about work that I don't get an opportunity to hear about in Australia. I particularly enjoyed Vicki Grieves' (Uni of Sydney) presentation titled 'Ngarrangga Barrangang: Indigenous Knowledges, Spirituality and New/Old Approaches to Australian History'. Vicki argued for and reinforced the need for research that privileges Indigenous spirituality, philosophies and methods of knowledge production. Her presentation was very well received and generated a lot of interest. I additionally attended the presentation by Maggie Walter (University of Tasmania) and Aileen Moreton-Robinson (Queensland University of Technology) within the session titled *Building Indigenous Research Leadership*. Aileen and Maggie provided an overview of the Indigenous Research Methodologies Masterclass that they are rolling out across Australia during 2009 and 2010. There was a lot of interest in the Masterclass program and recognition that this was something that might be of interest for people in the USA and Canada too. My paper titled 'Being and Living in an Australian Urban Community' focused on the issues that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples face, explored why there has been limited research based in urban areas and highlighted some of the innovative research, which tries to address this gap. The research issues presented within my paper resonated with some of the associated issues presented in the other two papers in the panel session titled *Narrating Urban Experiences*.

It was great hearing the work of Indigenous Australian scholars being quoted within some of the presentations by Native American, Hawaiian, Meitis and First Nations Canadian scholars. This included work by Lester Irrabinna Rigney, Aileen Moreton-Robinson and Ian Anderson. Aileen Moreton-Robinson's books, *Talkin Up to the White Women Indigenous Women and Feminism* (2000) and *Sovereign Subjects Indigenous Sovereignty Matters* (2007) are both used as texts in various academic programs in the USA and her work was often quoted. At this Conference more than any other, I gained a far greater appreciation of how Indigenous scholars are engaged in the collective Indigenous struggle and how our research informs each other within that struggle.

The next meeting of the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association is being hosted by the Department of American Indian Studies, University of Arizona, from the 19th – 22nd May, 2010. The deadline for paper proposals (abstracts) is the 1st December, 2009. Detailed instructions for submitting proposals will be available by 1st October, 2009 on the website

(www.naisa.org). Information on the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association is also posted on the website.

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